ON TRACK WITH MDT

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In last month's column I discussed MDT's need to change the way we think, and I've found myself expanding on that theme, both internally and externally, over the past several weeks. I believe in our mission, and I know that we must work together to provide quality service – good roads – to the traveling public.

One way that we can provide that quality is by striving for consistency in our highway projects. This means starting with a sound, buildable design; proceeding with good construction practices; and ending with a product that we can all be proud of. Quality needs to be everyone's goal.

MDT is working to improve quality by refining our use and understanding of contract specifications. For years, the department relied heavily on what we call method specifications, or specs that describe the exact process or procedure to be taken to achieve an end result. This type of spec states how to do a job, not necessarily what the end result should be: i.e., excavate down eight inches, backfill with "x" material, and compact in six-inch lifts to the specified density. The description of the process is very detailed, it allows for little deviation, and it does not define the desired product in any measurable manner.

As processes changed and contract change orders ensued, MDT started to look beyond method specs to what we call quality control / quality assurance or QCQA specifications. QCQA specs statistically define the contractor's responsibility for controlling the quality of the product being produced and the department's responsibility for testing the material to ensure we're getting the product described in the specification. (A good example is a compaction spec.) This improved the process, but we found that QCQA specs were not enough, so we started looking toward more of what we call end result specifications.

End result specifications describe the final product that MDT expects and the manner in which that determination will be made. (A good example is a ride spec.) Use of this type of specification is desirable because it recognizes that there are situations where the standard process is not practical or desirable, and it does not penalize the contractor for defining the best process for a given project. In addition, end result specs provide accountability in terms of the final product, something that the department has defined as a priority. As use of this type of specification increases, there will be more consistent application of incentives / disincentives in each contract as a means of providing greater accountability during the road-building process. MDT's focus on a quality product means that we are asking for – and expecting – only high-end results from both our employees and our partners. Everyone, from the designer to the equipment operator to the contractor, must be held to that standard, and you will hear me reiterating that point until we have a consistent, quality product that we can all be proud of.

From MDT's perspective, it's important that everyone involved in the process understand the crucial nature of project specifications and our collective need for a quality product. That may be a new concept, but changing the way we think is part of being "on track" with MDT.

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